DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 337 407 SO 021 565

AUTHOR VanSledright, Bruce A.; Brophy, Jere
TITLE Storytelling, Imagination, and Fanciful Elaboration in Children's Historical Reconstructions. Elementary Subjects Center Series No. 38.
INSTITUTION Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, East Lansing, MI.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE May 91
CONTRACT G0098C0226
NOTE 34p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Child Development; *Cognitive Development; Grade 4; *History Instruction; Imagination; Intermediate Grades; Interviews; *Learning Processes; Learning Theories; Narration; *Schemata (Cognition); *Social Studies; *Storytelling; United States History
IDENTIFIERS *Historical Explanation; Michigan State University

ABSTRACT

Interviews with fourth graders who had not yet received systematic instruction in U.S. history revealed that these students are interested in the past, concerned about human intentionality and cause-effect relationships, and able to construct coherent narrative accounts of historical events as they understand them. However, they lack an experience-based schematic framework capable of grounding and connecting their historical thinking, so that their accounts often mix accurate information with conflations, naive conceptions, and imaginative elaborations. This is demonstrated in the historical accounts given by children at this beginning stage of learning about history. The children's accounts can be explained with reference to Kieran Egan's developmental notions and to issues involved in teaching history to elementary grade students and assessing their historical understandings (including both accurate knowledge and misconceptions). Nineteen references are included; one appendix is attached. (DB)

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STORYTELLING, IMAGINATION, AND FANCIFUL ELABORATION IN CHILDREN'S HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

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College of Education
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Published by

The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects
Institute for Research on Teaching
252 Erickson Hall
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan 48824-1034

May 1991

This work is sponsored in part by the Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects, Institute for Research on Teaching, Michigan State University. The Center for the Learning and Teaching of Elementary Subjects is funded primarily by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education. The opinions expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position, policy, or endorsement of the Office or Department (Cooperative Agreement No. G0098C0226).

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Abstract

Interviews with fourth graders who had not yet received systematic instruction in American history revealed that these students are interested in the past, concerned about human intentionality and cause-effect relationships, and able to construct coherent narrative accounts of historical events as they understand them. However, they lack an experience-based schematic framework capable of grounding and connecting their historical thinking, so that their accounts often mix accurate information with conflations, naive conceptions, and imaginative elaborations. This article provides examples of the historical accounts given by children at this beginning stage of learning about history and discusses them with reference to Kieran Egan's developmental notions and to issues involved in teaching history to elementary grade students and assessing their historical understandings (including both accurate knowledge and misconceptions).

STORYTELLING, IMAGINATION, AND FANCIFUL ELABORATION IN CHILDREN'S HISTORICAL RECONSTRUCTIONS

Bruce A. VanSledright and Jere Brophy[1]

A significant body of knowledge has been developed on children's knowledge constructions, naive conceptions, and misconceptions about topics taught in elementary science (Anderson & Smith, 1986). This has led to "conceptual change" models of science teaching and learning. By contrast, except for some very recent work by Levstik and Pappas (1987), Levstik (1986, 1989), McKeown and Beck (1990), and Wilson (in press), there has not been much research on children's knowledge of and thinking about American history. The situation has prompted Thornton and McCourt-Lewis (1990) to conclude that

> it is high time for the educational effects of these topics [in American history] on students to be documented--both to identify what learning, if any, is on target and to determine whether changes or additions to instruction, curriculum, and materials are needed to bring about improvements in learning. (p. 6)

The research reported here is responsive to this call for more information about children's knowledge about American history and sense making of historical concepts.

Young Children and Learning History

Several investigators have noted that children tend to construct detailed, story-like accounts when asked to relate events or describe situations that have historical dimensions. These accounts often reflect a search for meaning that is theoretical and focused on cause-and-effect relationships (Bruner, 1986; Keil, 1984). These same attributes are staples of historical study, so that, at least in these ways, children's responses indicate patterns

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of historical thought as documented by Levstik and Pappas (1987) and Levstik (1989). Our research has focused on the particulars of what students do with specific questions that challenge them to describe their historical understandings. What kinds of historical conceptions do they create? Where do their ideas originate from? What sources do they draw upon and how do they invent ways to make sense of history as they understand it? And what are possible implications for elementary history teaching?

Studies by Furth (1980) and by McKeown and Beck (1990) indicate that students *extrapolate imaginatively* from many sources, *elaborate* on the information they possess, and frequently *conflate* ideas as they construct responses. From an adult or expert perspective, the understandings that students create appear sometimes incomplete, often misconceived, occasionally touching or humorous, but nonetheless internally logical and highly creative. These accounts clearly indicate receptivity to and interest in historical matters, and they point to possibilities for powerful learning opportunities that revolve around key historical ideas and representations.

However, the naive and imaginative qualities of students' extrapolations, elaborations, and conflations suggest two fundamental concerns about how they learn history. First, children lack an *experiential* knowledge base (beyond their own personal history) from which to draw information for developing historical constructions and understandings. In early childhood, they learn about the physical world, about plants and animals, and about numbers and quantitative relationships through direct, experiential contact with manipulable aspects of their environment. By contrast, historical understanding lacks this experiential base. Thus, in reference to historical knowledge, the idea of a misconception takes on a new meaning--one that makes it less useful for describing children's historical thinking than for describing their scientific

thinking. For young children, learning history is less a matter of correcting misconceptions than a matter of constructing historical understandings in the absence of an experiential knowledge base.

This leads to the second concern. Although young children are skilled in narrative thought (Bruner, 1985; Egan, 1989) and thus are prepared at least in this respect for historical study, they typically do not get systematic exposure to the study of history prior to fifth grade. They get smatterings of historical content in various units on Native Americans, the Pilgrims, or state history, but systematic instruction in history as such does not begin until the American history course typically taught in fifth grade (Brophy, 1990). Consequently, as they strive to make sense of the history they are learning, many children construct accounts that draw from a wide range of sources, including many that would not be seen as appropriate from an adult or expert perspective. They may seem intuitively correct to the children, however, because they lack a schematic structure or "semantic net" (McKeown & Beck, 1990) to serve as an organizer for establishing inclusion and exclusion rules that aid in judging the probable validity of historical accounts and relevance of various events and details.

This suggests the need for establishing such a structure prior to attempts to add more events and details. Studies of experts' historical knowledge and understanding (Gobbo & Chi, 1986; Prawat, Brophy, & McMahon, 1990; Wineburg, in press; Wineburg & Wilson, 1988) suggest that experts possess such organizational structures and use them to anchor their judgments about the relevance and believability of historical information. These studies do not trace the process or identify the points at which this organizing structure comes to operate effectively, but they do show that possession and use of such a structure is a distinguishing feature of historical expertise. Our research

focuses on students who are just starting to establish such a structure and whose historical thinking is still marked by imaginative elaborations, conflation, and naive conceptions.

Method

We conducted our inquiry at a midwestern suburban elementary school that serves a predominantly white and middle/working class community. At the end of fourth grade, prior to their systematic introduction to American history in fifth grade, we interviewed 10 students. Four of these students were high achievers, four were average achievers, and two were low achievers, with equal numbers of males and females within each category. We weighted the sample toward higher achievers in the expectation that this would lead to more substantive responses and fewer "I don't know" responses.

Questions were developed after meeting with the fifth-grade teacher to discuss the major themes and unit topics that she would cover in American history. The interview included 23 question on topics such as the work of historians, the early explorations and colonization of America, the birth of the country, westward expansion, and the Civil War (see Appendix).

Interview Responses

The students' answers to questions on history and the work of historians indicated that they generally understood that history refers to events that happened in the past, although they tended to qualify it as referring to events that occurred *long ago* or that were *noteworthy* in some respect. They were unfamiliar with the work of historians and had difficulty envisioning it. Many of them confused historians with archeologists and pictured historians as digging up and interpreting artifacts rather than as interviewing people or working from books, diaries, or other written sources of information.

The students retained bits and pieces of historical information that they had picked up in earlier grades or in out-of-school experiences, but they did not possess systematic information about the history of the United States as a nation. They were familiar with time lines and with the functions of candle-holders that we showed them as artifacts of everyday life prior to electric lighting, and many of them also knew that the New World had been discovered by Europeans seeking a shorter way to China. However, none of the students knew about the land bridge or where the Native Americans had come from, and most were vague about who the Europeans were and why they were exploring the New World (other than to find a shorter way to China). The students also were vague about the notion of a colony, and most could not name any of the people or groups who came to America to settle. They were able to respond when asked more directly about the Pilgrims but only within the narrow context of the story of the first Thanksgiving.

No student gave a clear account of how the colonies became the United States. Several suggested that a war was involved but were unclear or incorrect about who fought the war or why. The students were similarly vague and confused about the Civil War. Questions about both wars produced conflations with what the students had learned in a fourth-grade unit on Michigan history about French and Indian War battles that occurred in Michigan. When asked about wagon trains, pioneers, and the frontier, the students showed awareness that people had to travel by horse and wagon in the days before motor vehicles, but they did not show awareness of the general westward migration pattern or of the notion of a wagon train as a line of wagons moving together. Details about these general trends in the students' answers to our questions are given in Brophy, VanSledright, and Bredin (in press).

There were some interesting subgroup differences within these general trends, although not enough students were interviewed to allow for statistical testing of group differences. In general, the high achievers spoke succinctly and to the point when they knew or thought they knew an answer but said little or nothing beyond "I don't know" when they did not. In contrast, the average and low achievers tended to be more wordy in their responses, although their lengthier answers were not qualitatively better than the brief responses produced by the high achievers. One reason for this was that the average and low achievers often took more words to say essentially the same thing that the high achievers had said more economically (e.g., the average or low achievers might give several examples of a more general idea, whereas the high achievers might articulate the idea itself). A second reason for the lengthier responses of the average and low achievers was that they usually were more willing to speculate if they were not sure of their answers. Consequently, these students sometimes constructed narratives that combined accurate information with misinformation or fanciful imaginative elaborations.

In the present paper, we focus on these constructed narratives, providing excerpts particularly salient as illustrations of the sources, imaginative elaborations, conflations, and novice conceptions of the children's historical sensemaking. Several were selected as representative of the sort of narrative, storytelling responses that reflect children's historical focus on human intentionality and the results of human actions. Many of these selected responses also make clear the degree to which these children lacked organizing structures to use as scaffolds on which to construct their understandings. In many ways, Helen (all names are pseudonyms) exemplifies all of these trends.

Interview protocol question: What about our country--does the United States have a history? When does that history begin?

Helen: Yes.

I: Does it have a birthday?

H: Yes it does. On Columbus Day.

I: Tell me a little bit about Columbus and why we say that.

H: People say that Columbus first landed in America and named it that but I think that another person, I can't remember his name, he found it first and Columbus went to the west and landed to the west about two years later. He sailed over here but it was already owned by this other person, but people say Columbus really found America.

I: Who is this other person? Was he another explorer?

H: I don't know. I'm not sure. I think he was a pirate or something and sailed to America and named it that. After his name. It had America in it. I think he landed on it and he landed on the west side and like two years later he sailed over to where Amerigo got there and they kind of got together, but I'm not real sure.

I: Who got together?

H: The one guy and Columbus. Something must have happened to him before America got started as a country.

I: How do you know about all that?

H: I saw it on a show. I think it was a cartoon and this guy was learning and he had a history test and they gave him all this information.

I: Was this on television?

H: Yeah. The "Chipmunks." Theodore was having a test and Simon and Alvin were trying to help him, giving him clues like "General Custer" and stuff like that.

<u>Interview protocol question</u>: Who lived in these colonies back then? Who came to America and why did they come?

Helen: The Pilgrims came first on a boat called the Mayflower and that's how we got "April showers brings May flowers." That's how we got that. The rock was Plymouth Rock where they settled.

I: Do you know where Plymouth Rock is?

H: I think it's in the upper peninsula somewhere [i.e., in Michigan].

I: Actually it's in Massachusetts. Do you know where Massachusetts is?

H: I'm not real sure about it any more.

I: Where did you learn about the Pilgrims? On the "Chipmunk" show?

H: No [laughs]. They couldn't survive the winter. They didn't know how to survive it. They had just one little loaf of bread and it had to last them all winter. Then the Indians brought them food when the spring came for Thanksgiving and that's how we got Thanksgiving. They had turkey and stuffing and I don't know any more about it. The Indians brought them food and then I'm not real sure what happened.

I: But you know the Indians and the Pilgrims got together?

H: Yeah, they cooperated. Then the Indians brought them the food and so they had a lot of food to survive the spring and just to survive the rest of their life.

I: Where did you learn all this?

H: Just hearing about it and learning it from school.

I: What grade did you study that in?

H: Third and fourth. Third I didn't learn that much. I learned about the Indians and the Pilgrims. In fourth grade I got the hang of what was going on and what really happened. I'm not saying in third grade all I learned was wrong but in fourth I learned even more.

I: Do you know of anybody else that came here besides the Pilgrims?

H: Indians. I was going to say pirates but they didn't. I can't think of anymore.

I: Do you know why they came to the New World?

H: I think their own world was getting wrecked by something. Someone was like trashing it. They were ruining their world and they had to find a new one, I guess.

I: Where was their world?

H: I think that was Europe.

Interview protocol question: Have you heard of the Revolutionary War, or the War for Independence?

Helen: No.

I: It was called the Revolutionary War. Does that sound familiar to you?

H: Yeah.

I: What do you know about that war?

H: There were a lot of soldiers in it.

I: Who fought against whom?

H: The British and the Americans.

I: So they fought and who won?

H: The British.

I: OK. How did the United States come to be?

H: The United States was really poor and it didn't have that much but the British had fabulous stuff and they weren't poor. They had clothes and stuff like that. Then America was just this poor country. There were people there but they weren't the richest part of the world. The British agreed to never fight the Americans again and America agreed to that. They never fought again but the British, I'm not sure about this part, but I think the British went against their promise and the British left and they had to do something like sign a paper or something to get it together, a promise and then the British left and they never got to sign or do whatever they had to do to make the promise but then a few years later, I think they fought. But this time, America was rich and had a lot of soldiers and the Americans won over the British and that's how we got our country.

I: So the Americans finally did win over the British.

H: Yeah, but the British won three or four times and America only won once. The Americans won so the British--there was only one or two people left.

I: That war was called the Revolutionary War or sometimes it's called the War for Independence and the Americans did win that war. The word independence means to separate from the English. That's when the Americans decided they were going to be free from England. So they signed a document called the Declaration of Independence. Have you ever heard of that?

H: Yeah. John Quincy Adams was on that. Thomas Jefferson? I think he's a famous inventor.

Helen seemed quite pleased with her responses to these questions. She smiled and appeared eager to continue. Her responses were characterized by animation and a degree of certitude that accompanies the telling of a story that one believes to be accurate. Although she displayed clear misconceptions about crucial details and her elaborations from a variety of sources produced

curious conflations, she demonstrated the ability to create reasonably believable historical accounts. Helen's narrative style of thinking allowed her to piece together unconnected bits of historical information (albeit in a naive way), so as to make some sense out of the past and draw it into her present sense of reality. However, her ability to understand history was limited by the placement of particular details within the context of her storytelling accounts. Details were taken from almost anywhere and fitted in such a way to make the stories compelling, but far from accurate.

To the extent that history can be thought of as narrative redescriptions of important and memorable events, complete with actors and their motives and intentions, cause and effect scenarios, drama, and believability, it is subsumed easily within the type of cognition characteristic of Helen. But Helen is not alone. Consider Rita's responses. Notice her concern for the believable and how the human quality of providing information through storytelling presents the ground for truth on which her decisions can be made.

Interview protocol question: Sometimes historians disagree about what happened in the past, why it happened, or what it all means. When they disagree, how can they decide what is right?

> *Rita*: They'd try to . . . I don't know. They'd talk to other scientists and try to see how they think and they'd try to work it out. Say you . . . they'd . . . oh, gosh. This is hard. Yeah, like they'd take it to a judge or something, a judge that's higher than these scientists but that's a scientist judge. Someone that all of them trust and they'd know that he'd tell the truth.
>
> I: How would that person figure out what was right?
>
> R: He'd try to listen to both sides and he'd say "Well, I think this guy's right, but he could be right too," and he'd try to take both sides and try to work it out.

Interview protocol question: What about you--what if you were reading about something in history that you were interested in and found that different sources disagreed? How could you decide what to believe?

Rita: Well, some books like encyclopedias . . . this one kind of encyclopedia, say Webster encyclopedias have something that this one doesn't and the other kind has something that this doesn't, so you kind of say OK, all right. This one says this and this one says that and I just believe I'd go with the person or book or whatever that has the most ideas.

I: The most? You mean the one that seemed to know more about it?

R: Yeah.

I: OK, anything else about how you'd make up your mind?

R: I'd try to read more and try to figure it out by myself and then if I couldn't see who was right, then I'd take it to my parents and they'd try to figure it out.

Rita also demonstrated the allure of storytelling in her construction of events surrounding the development of the New World. Like Helen, she seemed pleased with the story she told and convinced of its accuracy in recreating human motives and cause-effect linkages. But also like Helen, she lacked a larger schematic in which to situate her account. This allowed them both, as illustrated by what follows, to elaborate on and conflate information from a variety of sources despite prior study of the topic of this next question in fourth grade.

Interview protocol question: Our country is in the part of the world called America. At one time, America was called the New World. Do you know why it was called the New World?

Rita: Yeah. We learned this in social studies.

I: What did you learn?

R: Because they used to live in England, the British, and they didn't know about . . . they wanted to get to China 'cause China had some things they wanted. They had some cups or whatever--no, they had furs. They had fur and stuff like that and they wanted to have a shorter way to get

to China so they took it and they landed in Michigan, but it wasn't called Michigan. I think it was the British that landed in Michigan and they were there first and so they tried to claim that land, but it didn't work out for some reason so they took some furs and brought them back to Britain and they sold them, but they mostly wanted it for the furs. So then the English landed there and they claimed the land and they wanted to make it a state, and so they got it signed by the government or whoever, the big boss, then they were just starting to make it a state so the British just went up to the Upper Peninsula and they thought they could stay there for a little while. Then they had to fight a war, then the farmers, they were just volunteers, so the farmers went right back and tried to get their family put together back again.

I: Did you learn all this in state history this year [fourth grade]?

R: Um hum.

Helen: Because nobody had ever been there before and to the people that just got there it was the New World from where they were before.

I: Who had just got here and where did they come from?

H: Columbus came from Europe. Is that right?

I: Yes. Why did he come here?

H: I think he was looking for a new place to live because back then Europe was really crowded and he wanted to get a new home or bigger home and more space to move around.

I: Was he the only one that was looking around for a new place to live?

H: No.

I: Were there other people doing this?

H: Yeah, Amerigo. He found that instead of Columbus.

I: Were there other ones besides Columbus and Amerigo?

H: There was but I can't think of any.

I: Were there any other reasons they were out there looking around and they stumbled on America?

H: Just to cruise the water? They just bumped into it?

I: How did they come here?

H: Sailboat. They were in sort of like pirate boats but they didn't have the skull and crossbones on it and stuff like that.

Motives and intentions that produced historical consequences appeared to intrigue others besides Rita and Helen. Despite their particularistic errors, many students' re-creations of events were strengthened somewhat when the questions appealed to stories involving human needs and goals coupled with anticipation and spirited action. Here is Tim's account of the birth of the United States and his conflated version of the Civil War.

Interview protocol question: So for many years the American settlements were English colonies, but later they became the United States. Do you know how that happened?

Tim: The Constitution.

I: Can you tell me some more about that?

T: They wrote a bunch of rules and it was the Constitution.

I: Do you know why they did that or anything more about it?

T: Because they wanted to become a country.

I Why did they want that?

T: Because they wanted to. The people from England, the kings, they wanted to rule the world. They wanted more land.

I: The people did or the king did or they both did?

T: The people . . . the main guy of England. The people did too.

I: Anything else about that?

T: No.

I: Where did you hear about all of this--about the Constitution?

T: Social studies and just books. There's a book on presidents that I read and it has all that stuff in it.

Interview protocol question: Have you heard about the Civil War? (If yes: What do you know about that war?)

Tim: I don't think it's the one in 1865. It's close to the 1900s. Isn't that World War I?

I: It was the one in 1865. World War I was later. Do you know anything about the Civil War in 1865? What was it all about?

T: It was the North and the South and the South wanted all the land and the North wanted all the land and it was mainly the English colonies and just this little . . . [uses hand gesture to indicate the border between the English colonies and the French territories to the west that he has seen on a map] right down the middle of the country. It was called the territories and they split it in half and then it was the North and South and the West was unknown land so they battled for the country.

I: And why did the North and South start battling?

T: Because they wanted the whole country to themselves.

I: Where did you learn all this?

T: From books.

Concern about people, their place in history, and their importance also affected students' storytelling conceptualizations. Often, with protocol questions aimed at uncovering their sense of why they must study history in school, they indicated this directly. History for them involved the potential for "gripping drama" (Bruner, 1985) and the importance of these historical scenarios for the present state of things (but not without the ever-present tendency to extrapolate, elaborate, and conflate). For Sue and again Helen, the reason history is taught in school involves just such matters.

Interview protocol question: Why do you think they teach history in school--why do they think you should study the past?

Sue: So you can know about the important people back then and what they did for our country and maybe how famous they were because they were a president or something.

I: Why is it important to know that?

S: Because if somebody comes up and asks you what's the first president, you want to tell them and you would want to know.

I: Why would you want to know?

S: Because I'm sure those people that were important back then would want people now to know what they did for people.

Helen: To learn about ancient history, the things that happened way back then so when a person asks you like did you know about George Washington, you could say yeah, I studied that in history. And she'd say why or something like that and you'd say cause history, he's ancient, so he's history.

I: Why is that good to know about?

H: Well, to me it's really interesting to learn about different people that lived way back then and how different their world was back then with the world now and how it was different and how we are the same.

I: Are you glad you live now rather than back in ancient times?

H: No.

I: You'd rather live in the ancient times?

H: Yeah. No school.

I: But they had to walk around with these candles. They had no indoor bathrooms.

H: That's OK as long as they had toilet paper.

Interview protocol question: How might learning history help you in life outside of school, either now or in the future?

Sue: Cause maybe if someone wanted something back then, maybe you could help them with doing it today. Maybe it was easier.

I: Tell me more . . .

S: If someone wanted a law in the country and it's still not here now, then maybe someone could carry it on and ask the people to make a law about that.

I: Are there any other ways that studying the past, learning history, would help you today--help you live your life maybe?

S: Not that I can think of. Oh, well people that were important back then may have done something for our country like slaves. There are not slaves anymore, so somebody might have wanted the people not to be slaves so now there's no slaves.

We encountered several additional responses that are worth noting. Although not storylike per se, they indicate clearly how students construct naive conceptions derived from a range of sources and how they elaborate and conflate historical information without the benefit of organizing schemas.

Interview protocol question: Do you have your own personal history, or life history? . . . When does it begin? (What was the first day of your life history?)

Helen: What do you mean by that?

I: I'll put it this way. Do you have a life history?

H: I'm not really into it that much. I like history, but it's not my life.

I: Let me see if I can rephrase that. You're how old?

H: 10.

I: When's your birthday?

H: April 8th.

I: So from 10 years ago until now, there's all of that time. Is that like history, a history of your life?

H: I wouldn't say so. That's 10 years. History's gotta be more than that.

Interview protocol question: What about our country--does the United States have a history? When does that history begin? (Did the United States have a birthday--a day that was its first day as a country? . . . When was that?)

Kay: Yes.

I: When does that history begin?

K: I think when the United States was discovered and people found it.

I: Does the United States have a birthday, a day that was it's first day as a country?

K Yeah. It's called Earth Day, I think.

[Note: Interviews were conducted in early June, approximately a month after the celebration of Earth Day nationally.]

Interview protocol question: For a long time, the Indians were the only people who lived in America. But then some other people came and started colonies. Do you know what *colonies* are?

> *Jason*: A piece of land surrounded by three parts of water. A piece of land.
>
> I: Did you study that somewhere?
>
> J: Second grade.

Interview protocol question: So for many years the American settlements were English colonies, but later they became the United States. Do you know how that happened?

> *Brad*: Well first it was the unknown land, the English colonies that the British owned and in between those two were the, I forgot what you call them, but then they started and they called the English colonies the U.S. [colonies] but they changed it and later they starting fighting and stuff and they were fighting over Michigan but I forgot how the unknown lands and the rest of the lands became the U.S.

Discussion

The interview responses presented here indicate that children possess interest in historical detail, are concerned about patterns of human intentionality (cause and effect), and are able to construct and appreciate historical drama. However, they also illustrate how, lacking an experiential knowledge base to anchor their constructions, children try to make sense of whatever bits and pieces of history they may know (or think they know) by drawing on whatever sources may be available to them and grasping for relevance and connections. They often produce accounts that hang together in that they contain all of the key elements in story grammar but mix accurate historical information with conflations, naive conceptions, and imaginative elaborations. Not all of the children that we interviewed routinely spun out such narratives. Some of them confined themselves to briefer and more generalized responses to our initial

questions and some required probing that yielded only short and disconnected responses to a series of more specific questions. Even the briefer and less connected types of responses, however, frequently reflected naiveté, conflation, or other evidence of historical confusion or misconceptions. We will discuss these findings with reference to Egan's (1989) notions about children's thinking and with reference to their potential implications for instruction and assessment.

Egan (1989) identifies four "layers" in the development of historical thinking: the mythic, the romantic, the theoretic or pattern seeking, and the study of details. In the mythic layer, historical understanding involves making use of the past "to emphasize the significance and validity of the present experience of individuals, groups, or nations, thereby establishing a sense of security and a sense of identity" (p. 281). The romantic layer exemplifies history as dramatic narrative filled with larger-than-life characters, exciting events, and rich detail. The theoretic or pattern-seeking layer of historical understanding is characterized by the search for "underlying patterns or even the laws of history" (p. 281). The fourth layer, interest in historical detail for its own sake, appears to be most common in academic settings, where those who make use of it concentrate on the minutiae of how things happened.

Egan argues that the mythic and romantic layers are already accessible to elementary children because they possess story-like dimensions (e.g., heroes, plots), binary distinctions (e.g., good versus evil), and human intentionality. Our interview data support these contentions, in that many of the responses were phrased in narrative form and displayed features that Egan would identify with the first two layers in his conception (the mythic and the romantic). However, close analysis of at least some of the more story-like accounts documented here reveals the presence of the latter two layers as well,

suggesting that these layers are not beyond children's (or at least fifth-graders') cognitive abilities.

Notice that several responses, Helen's and Rita's particularly, contain pattern-seeking elements that include the internal scaffolding structures needed to construct believable story-like accounts (evidence of the theoretic or pattern-seeking layer). Notice also the prominence of details, especially the more novel ones, in almost all of the responses (evidence of the detail study layer). Thus, these children did not seem to lack the ability to engage in forms of historical thinking reflective of Egan's higher two layers, at least when these were applied to aspects of history that were not too abstract or complex for them to understand. What the children did seem to lack were organizational schemas that would allow them to put their pattern-seeking constructions and attention to detail to work for them in developing justifiable historical understandings.

Children in the primary grades can benefit from units on Native Americans or on life in the "old days" (in the early colonies or on the frontier) before they get exposed to systematic instruction in history. However, when they begin studying American history in fifth grade (and perhaps even when they study state history in fourth grade, if curriculum guidelines call for a systematic sequential survey rather than a mere sampling of a few highlights), they will need a framework upon which to build and within which to situate their historical understandings and constructions. As Downey and Levstik (1988) observe:

> Meaning appears to derive from notions of cause and explanation, with the result that concepts may need to be embedded in causal theories to have real power for the learner. Causal relationships empower the learner to make inductions and draw analogies. They provide coherence to the elements that make up a concept and bind together the features that

> occur together. Children's causal theories drawn from historical narrative . . . might provide children with a framework for interpreting historical information from other sources. Decontextualized information would . . . have a minimal impact on historical understanding. (p. 340)

This does not mean that history instruction must start with the beginnings of recorded history and proceed forward in strict chronological order, but it does mean that historical treatment of any particular time and place needs to be contextualized within the broad sweep of history with reference to time lines, landmark events and inventions, and social and political developments. American history, for example, begins with information about Native Americans and about the discovery, exploration, and eventual colonization of the New World by Europeans. This information needs to be taught within a context that will allow students to draw valid inferences about causal relationships and avoid the kinds of naive conceptions, conflations, and fanciful elaborations that were elicited during our interviews. Research is needed on what elements should be included in such a context.

We suspect that, in addition to introducing students to time lines and to history as a discipline, an adequate context for anchoring and supporting introduction to American history would include (a) introduction to certain broad themes in sociopolitical developments through time (progressions from nomadic hunting and gathering societies, to stable but small farming communities, to the rise of towns as centers of commerce and culture, to city-states and federations, to larger nations; progression in European perceptions from a world centered around the Mediterranean to a world centered around the Middle East to a world centered around the Atlantic coast of Europe), (b) life in Europe during the 15th and 16th centuries (modern in many respects but no engine-powered transportation, no electronic communications, etc.), and (c) the leading European nations' economic agendas and rivalries (shipbuilding and

navigation advances that increased the scope and importance of trade with other nations, search for better routes to the Far East, establishment of colonies). With this kind of a context in place, students would have a much better sense of who the different people that they were studying were, what agendas they were pursuing, and what resources they had available to them.

This introduction would be a brief overview lasting for a few lessons rather than a detailed treatment extending for weeks or months. It might be approached through dramatic, story-like accounts that would make considerable use of the mythic and romantic layers in presentation, but in doing so, would introduce patterns and details as well. The first two layers could provide the formal or syntactic structure for developing historical understanding, while the latter two layers could provide the substantive content by offering patterns and details relevant as chronological precursors to American history. In this way, the students would learn a reflexive process between the formal and substantive dimensions, a process in which they already are partially engaged, that would contextualize their growing knowledge. This in turn would provide the basis upon which to change their naive conceptions, conflations, and imaginative elaborations.

The conceptual changes induced in this fashion would be different in some ways from those advocated in science and mathematics education. The latter approach is applicable wherever clear-cut misconceptions exist, but our interview findings suggest that such misconceptions are difficult to determine accurately in history. The children whom we interviewed possessed a number of historical conceptions that were accurate as far as they went but were subsumed within larger narrative accounts that included conflations or fanciful elaborations based on naive conceptions of motivations and causal relationships. Children beginning the study of history are not burdened with many experience-based

misconceptions of the kind that frequently distort their learning of science or mathematics, but neither have they acquired much experiential knowledge that can be used as a base from which to build additional historical conceptions. One must construct initial ideas, working through analogies to and contrasts with familiar experience, rather than building directly upon it. In the process, one must find ways to encourage and help students to engage in historical reasoning (i.e., not just to memorize information), but to do so using more valid conceptions and fewer conflations and fanciful elaborations than our interviewees used. We believe that establishing a context for study of the history of any particular time and place, as suggested above, is one way to accomplish this.

Children's tendencies to engage in fanciful constructions and elaborations complicate attempts to assess and monitor changes in their historical knowledge and thinking. For example, what constitutes accurate assessment of entry-level knowledge in the absence of an experiential knowledge base? Should one "credit" accurate elements when they are embedded in a larger narrative that includes imaginary elaborations or conflations? How can one assess what was learned as a direct consequence of instruction in the current course as distinct from bits and pieces gleaned from instruction in earlier grade levels, or for that matter, from watching the "Chipmunks" show? Should one even try? These are difficult questions that defy simple answers.

Similarly thorny questions arise with respect to pedagogical practices. Social educators often recommend Socratic questioning and inductive concept-development strategies. However, these instructional approaches appear to be contraindicated for history instruction, especially with children who are just being introduced to systematic instruction in history, who lack an experiential knowledge base, and who are prone to fanciful elaborations and conflations.

Although children's historical misconceptions are based mostly on intuitive narrative reasoning elaborated with fanciful details, they may prove to be just as stubbornly persistent as their scientific or mathematical misconceptions based on everyday experience. Our subsequent interviews are showing that some imaginative elaborations and conflations persist even after direct instruction designed to correct them. Thus, despite their fanciful qualities, these ideas apparently acquire a "ring of truth" for those children prone to construct and believe in them.

Conclusion

Elementary school children are interested in history and capable of learning it with understanding and appreciation, at least if instruction concentrates on aspects of the human condition that are comprehensible at their developmental levels. However, history's narrative form and its emphasis on content, context, and interpretation mark it off from other school subjects that tend to be organized and taught through "example-rule" or "rule-example" approaches. It appears that narrative approaches focused on the motives and agendas of individuals or groups that students can understand and identify with are needed to help students understand key causal relationships and connect them to larger historical themes. However, attention is needed to all of the "layers" of history if children are to learn to comprehend the connections between content, context, and interpretation (including their own constructions).

Organizing schemes presented in a mythic/romantic, story-like fashion may help to locate them and their reconstructions of history within the context of their place in the growth of the human community across time. This should precede any attempt to teach systematic history because it can serve as a

context of reference for young learners struggling to form initial ideas about an area of knowledge that lies mostly outside of their direct experience and, thus, prepare the way for conceptual changes in desired directions. The children's interview responses indicate that they not only are capable of understanding such contexts of reference but already are busy constructing their own. Unfortunately, their constructions are often riddled with naive conceptions, conflations, and imaginative but erroneous elaborations, so it becomes important to help them to construct a more valid context that will anchor their historical learning more productively.

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APPENDIX

Pre-Unit 1 Interview Questions

History and Historians

1. Next year in social studies with Mrs. (Name) you will be learning about history. Do you know what history is? (If students do not know or answer incorrectly, prepare them for the next questions by telling them that history is the study of the past--of who were the people who came before us and how they used to live back then).

2. What do historians do? (If students do not know or answer incorrectly, prepare them for the next question by telling them that historians study and write about history--they are the ones who write the history books).

3. How do you think historians do their work--how do they find out about what happened and decide what to write?

4. Sometimes historians disagree about what happened in the past, why it happened, or what it all means. When they disagree, how can they decide what is right?

5. What about you--what if you were reading about something in history that you were interested in and found that different sources disagreed? How could you decide what to believe?

6. Do you have your own personal history, or life history? . . . When does it begin? (What was the first day of your life history?)

7. What about our country--does the United States have a history? . . . When does that history begin? (Did the United States have a birthday--a day that was its first day as a country? . . . When was that?)

8. (Show old candle holder). . . . Do you know what this is? (Explain or clarify for student as necessary). What does this tell us about the people who used it?

9. (Show time line) . . . This is a kind of illustration used in teaching history. Do you know what it is called? . . . (If necessary, give the name time line. Then ask: What information does a time line give you?)

10 Why do you think they teach history in school--why do they think you should study the past?

11. How might learning about history help you in life outside of school, either now or in the future?

12. Our country is in the part of the world called America. At one time, America was called the New World. Do you know why it was called the New World?

13. Who were the explorers? . . . What do you think explorers did?

14. Who discovered America? (If student says Christopher Columbus, ask if anyone else discovered America before he did).

15. At first, the only people who lived in America were the Indians. Do you know where the Indians came from or how they got here?

16. For a long time, the Indians were the only people who lived in America. But then some other people came and started colonies. Do you know what <u>colonies</u> are?

17. Who lived in these colonies back then--who came to America and why did they come? (Probe for as many different groups as the student can name, asking in each case who the people were, where they came from, and why they came).

18. (If necessary) One group that came to America was called the <u>Pilgrims</u>. Have you heard of the Pilgrims? . . . Who were they, and why did they come?

19. Who owned the American colonies back then? What country was in charge? (If students do not know or answer incorrectly, tell them that England was in charge then).

20. So for many years the American settlements were English colonies, but later they became the United States. Do you know how that happened?

21. (If necessary). . . Have you heard of the Revolutionary War, or the War for Independence? (If yes: What do you know about that war?)

22. Have you heard about the Civil War? (If yes: What do you know about that war?)

23. Have you heard about wagon trains, or the frontier, or the pioneers? (Allow child to make an initial statement and then probe about each of these three terms. Without asking directly, determine if the child has some knowledge of westward expansion of the nation from an east coast base).